

The Failure That Was Half-life: Alyx - A Look Back

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An artifact as embarrassing as Artifact...

Remember Half-Life: Alyx?

After 13 years of avoiding making the long-awaited sequel to HL2: Episode 2, Valve suddenly decided to dig up the ol' Half-Life corpse and use its name to sell a VR tech demo.

Why? Well, the thing about nu-Valve is, aside from keeping their precious money makers (CSGO and DOTA) updated and relevant, nothing really gets done except for the random spurts of creativity on niche projects here and there (Shoutout to the Steam controller).

Thus Half-Life: Alyx was born.

I'll admit, it was a cute attempt to kickstart Virtual Reality (back?) into mainstream gaming. Problem is... Virtual Reality's biggest downside is inconvenience. As it turns out, inconvenience and the mainstream don't mix well together.

But this isn't *entirely* a scripture about VR (probably). This is about Half-Life: Alyx, a game that sat just below Artifact in terms of being a massive failure.

Yes, a massive failure. *Almost* as much as Artifact. I can hear the Valve fans fuming now, but I'm not bullshitting you. When a **video game** ends up having MORE Twitch viewers than actual players... something is amiss.

Often times I ask what justified Half-Life: Alyx being...

- A VR exclusive.
- A Retcon.
- Late to the party (13 years after Half-Life: Episode Two's release).

And yet, I never seem to get a logical answer.

According to Google trends: HL:A only remained popular for **TWO MONTHS** before falling off into irrelevancy.



And I know what the HL:A defenders will say. *"It's a **single player** game! Of course, people just ran out of things to talk about!"*

Which is a nil point because there's a ton of single player games that are still talked about for their deep/rich/profound story/gameplay/details, **decades** later. Fallout or the Elder Scrolls come to mind.

Red Dead Redemption 2 (minus the disaster that was its online mode) if you want a more recent example.

Let's travel back in time to HL2's release...

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=%2Fm%2F02rncz,%2Fg%2F11j10vp7s6>

Half-Life 2's popularity lasted from ~2004 to ~2010. Even after Episode 2's release, hype around Half-Life went on for three more years.

The original three Half-Life 2 installments had a lot going for them.

- Ushering in an era of modding and spinoffs with the Source engine.
- Using the most versatile platform as its selling-point (one of the many giants that launched PC gaming into stardom).
- Actually moved the story forward and ended on the tastiest cliffhanger in gaming history.

HL:A was the exact opposite of all these things, and look where the game ended up. From initial reveal to post-release, it is nearly invisible on the chart.

Let's dive deeper...

A VR exclusive

A fundamental principle in marketing is this: convenience.

If your product is not convenient, there's a very high chance it will not prosper.

Nothing about Half-Life: Alyx was convenient.

The most common argument I've seen people make in favor of HL:A's VR exclusivity is "*you just can't afford a VR headset!*"

To that I say... what a strange hill to die on, admitting the platform is too undesirable for the average, casual gamer to get into.

They will also tell you "*You can run HL:A on any platform! It's not **exclusively** for VR!*", which is another equally absurd argument that pretty much defeats itself if you think about it for more than ten seconds.

Expecting people to mod their game *just* to play it is, once again, an idiotic burden that you *cannot* expect from the mainstream.

And you wonder why the game fell into irrelevancy.

It's no joke, man. VR exclusive? Valve shot themselves in the foot.

VR might be a fancy accessory, but the exclusivity can go burn in a fire.

Video game exclusives **in general** are terrible enough. We've moved past the need to make cartridges and disk. We've moved past the need for physical materials to truly make a video game.

There is no longer an excuse **not** to host a game like Half-Life: Alyx on more platforms. Valve chose not to, and that is where the game suffered the most.

Exclusivity is artificial commodity, and practicing it is either capitalist dross or demented venture. Valve chose the latter course. They unfortunately made their "flagship" out of feces and the crew has long been dead from E. coli.

It **could have** been the flagship for **Source 2**, just as Half-Life 2 ushered in the OG Source engine with all the hype and talk that came with it.

You could've had **everyone** jumping in to see the new HL installment, AND a new engine for everyone to play around with.

But no, they couldn't be bothered. They made it VR exclusive, and if you want to play it properly? You have to hack it. In this economy where the average Zoomer doesn't have the attention span to deal with the inner workings of games these days? Doomed to fail.

A disrespectful retcon

You can imagine there's frustrations around attaching the sacred "Half-Life" name onto some unpopular, short-lived experiment that really didn't feel/play like a Half-Life at all, especially if you're an OG Valve fan.

I'd dare say HL:A wasn't even a Half-Life game, or even a game at all, rather than an extended 360° arcade machine.

They only used that title because they knew the starved Valve fans would eat it up. And eat it up they did.

HL:A did nothing with Half-Life's story. If anything, it just undid what had happened between Eli, Alyx, the Advisors, and Freeman, all the while leaving us with yet another cliffhanger with no end in sight.

The sound design is like that of crappy generic Sci-Fi. I can't recall a single song that reflected anything like Kelly Bailey's work in the OG Half-Lives. They didn't even want Merle Dandridge to voice Alyx.

Valve merely took a skeleton out of the grave, put it in a suit, and acted like it was an old friend reanimated.

Late to the party

In case I haven't repeated it enough times, Half-Life: Alyx came 13 years after Episode 2's release.

If you've paid any attention to Valve News Network over the years (whether you like him or not), countless projects got swept under the rug until this useless tech demo came out of the woodwork. I've written enough about my frustrations on how much time Valve wasted.

I envy those who could trick themselves into being thankful for this discount HL3 we all waited for. Me? Not so much.

In conclusion...

Half-Life: Alyx was a short-sighted product of spontaneity with no regard to posterity.

They could've spent the time and resources making an actual FPS under the Half-Life name, adaptable enough to be played on all platforms. They could've ushered in a new Half-Life zeitgeist if they bundled it with an SDK like HL2's case.

But no, all we got was a VR exclusive that died after 2 months. Objectively the worst ending.

And it's self-evident because nobody talks about the game anymore, but when it does come up? Valve fans will fight tooth and nail to argue that it was great.

They won't bring any actual logic to the table, but they'll fight, because they are scared to death to admit Valve makes mistakes, which is why Artifact has largely been memory holed.

But I never forgot. Valve lost their touch years ago.

With all that said, I'm certainly not saying the people who played HL:A **shouldn't** be happy. I'm not saying they **shouldn't** have enjoyed it.

Just as I do not negate the happiness of my neighbor as he drives a fighter jet around his gated community.

It's obnoxious, expensive as hell, and there's no room for it to take off, but he's enjoying the bare minimum... and I just want to slap him and tell him it should've been a VTOL.

With all that said, the burning question remains...

Should we expect another Half-Life?

Well I sure as shit ain't holding my breath. We've seen how bitter Valve gets when things don't go their way, and given the quick irrelevancy of Half-Life: Alyx, one has to wonder if they are ever going to bother with the series again at all.

Probably not, and it's probably for the best.

I'd love to be proven wrong. I'd love to wake up one morning and see "Half-Life 3 reveal trailer" in all its glory pop up in my YT subscriptions! Please, prove me wrong, I'm **literally** begging you.

So long as it's not another platform exclusive.

But in the meantime, I hereby see HL:A as a failure and I spit on its grave. It can be buried next to Artifact in the category of "embarrassing experiments that could've been Half-Life 3 if Valve stopped pussyfooting."

Bonus reading: "Valve isn't too keen on platform exclusivity"

Valve isn't too keen on platform exclusivity, says Holtman | VG247

If you want a laugh, here's a hilarious article to read.

"Valve tells developers to go where there is 'value, where else has customers, where else are good partners.'"

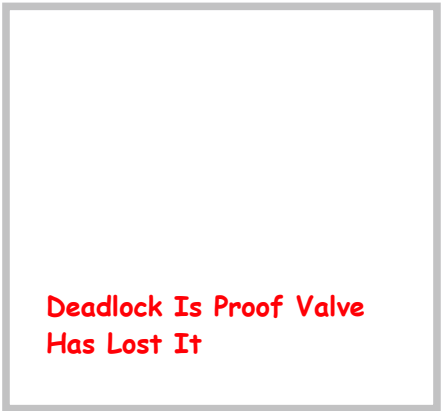
12 years ago, Valve's Jason Holtman gave us some reasons why exclusives are bad. While he's mostly talking about Steam Store exclusives, the exact same philosophy applies when you're talking about what platform to ship your games to.

Alas, Valve has changed beyond recognition since 2012.

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